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Kindalee Pfremmer De Long  
kdelong@pepperdine.edu

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# Praise as Resistance: A Reading of Mary's Song (Luke 1.46–55)

KINDALEE PFREMMER DE LONG

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As the 1965 film *The Sound of Music* opens, the camera moves across the majestic Austrian Alps, dipping into a beautiful valley then zooming in on a meadow, where it finally focuses on the joyous young protagonist of the story, Maria (Julie Andrews). With her face raised to the sun, Maria spins and raises her arms. Reveling in the glory of the natural world around her, she breaks into song, “The hills are alive, with the sound of music.” This famous opening sequence has affinity with the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke, which have been likened to a modern musical because they feature four praise songs, voiced by Mary, Zechariah, an angelic host and Simeon.

If we were to imagine Luke's opening chapters as a film, we might find a camera panning across the faces of Jews in antiquity, devoted to God but living in the dark night of Roman oppression. These upturned faces are expectant. Anticipating the arrival of redemption promised in holy texts, they watch for a day when God will save them from their enemies (Luke 1.54, 68, 71). Moving across this muted scene, the camera pauses momentarily on an elderly couple—Zechariah and Elizabeth—and finally zooms in on Mary, a faithful young woman, her face radiant in the light of a divine sunrise emerging on the horizon (Luke 1.78). Recognizing that this dawning light signifies the entry of God's mercy into her world, Mary—like Maria—breaks into joyous song (Luke 1.46–55).

In her praise, Mary envisions a bold reversal accomplished when God's mighty arm throws down those who grasp at power (and in so doing oppress others) and lifts up the poor. To appreciate her song fully, we must first get a sense of its setting in the story Luke tells. So before turning to the content of the song, we begin with the story that leads up to it, a story that involves a series of three surprises: first, the surprise visit by the angel Gabriel; second, the surprising reaction of Zechariah; and third, the surprising reaction of Mary.

## **SURPRISE #1: GABRIEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF JOY**

The angel Gabriel surprises the aged priest Zechariah while he stands in the temple, offering the daily sacrifice. This surprise announcement predicts the birth of John and defines this birth as beneficial on two levels: individual and communal. First, Zechariah will receive a child for whom he has prayed (Luke 1.13) but also, John will turn the people back toward God, making them ready for the Lord (Luke 1.16–17). The angel also predicts that John's birth will launch a two-fold expression of joy, also on the individual and communal levels. First, “joy and gladness will come” to Zechariah, and second, “many will rejoice because of [John's] birth” (Luke 1.14).<sup>1</sup> The joy anticipated by the angel is eschatological joy: it is the joy that Jews had long anticipated

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1. The phrase “because of his birth” (NIV) is often translated “at his birth” (NRSV, NAS, NKJ), which limits the angelic expectation of joy to the immediate setting of John's birth. In my view, “because of his birth” is a better translation, indicating that joy reverberates outward from John's birth into the rest of the story.



would greet the divine redemption of Israel.<sup>2</sup> This theme of joy will be fulfilled by Mary's song, as well as by seven other expressions of joyous praise in Luke 1–2.<sup>3</sup> Similar praise responses continue through the Gospel of Luke and into its companion volume, Acts.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Gabriel's announcement and Mary's song set the tone for the whole story told by Luke.

### **SURPRISE #2: ZECHARIAH'S DOUBT AND SILENCE**

Given Gabriel's angelic announcement of joy, a reader might expect Zechariah to rejoice, but surprisingly, he does not. In fact, Luke's presentation of Zechariah is paradoxical. On the one hand, Luke depicts him positively, as a devout and upstanding member of the Jewish religious establishment (Luke 1.6, 8–9). We see him respond to the angel with fear, which is the correct reaction (Luke 1.11). Zechariah understands what he sees. He has been praying for a child, so he must consider God capable of providing one (Luke 1.13). And he reacts to the angel with almost the very words that faithful Abraham used in a similar situation: he says, "How can I be sure of this?" (Luke 1.18).<sup>5</sup>

But on the other hand, these words of Abraham are contradictory and strange when *Zechariah* says them. Why? Because they reveal that Zechariah knows Abraham's story. In fact, he knows it well enough that he essentially quotes Abraham's own response. But if Zechariah has the benefit of knowing Abraham's story, then he ought to accept the truth of the angel's words, despite his surprise. But instead of recognizing and accepting Abraham's story as significant for his own life, Zechariah resists, requesting the very sign he already possesses (that is, Abraham's story in Genesis). The angel's criticism makes the priest's failure clear: he lacks faith and thus won't be unable to speak until his son is born (Luke 1.20). Because he cannot speak, neither can he respond with joyous praise. Thus the joy anticipated by Gabriel will be fulfilled not by an aged priest but by a young girl. Perhaps Luke tells the story this way in order to challenge his readers' socially-conditioned expectations about young girls and old priests—perhaps not. But certainly, the surprising failure of Zechariah makes the point that when divine mercy arrives, proper responses of joy and praise are not guaranteed, even for religious leaders who know their scripture.

### **SURPRISE #3: MARY'S DEEP THINKING AND TRUST**

Luke depicts Mary in contrast with Zechariah. He is an old man: she is a young woman, a virgin of the house of David. (Today, we would call her a teenager, for she was probably around thirteen.) Gabriel appears to Zechariah in a holy, public space—the temple—which was the heart of religious and political power in Roman Palestine. He appears to Mary in a private home in Nazareth, an insignificant village likely made up of nothing more than a handful of simple houses around a common well, set on a hill four miles from the city of Sepphoris, a center of Herodian power.

Given the birds offered as a sacrifice for Jesus' birth, Mary must have been a peasant (Luke 2.24). If so, her family depended on wealthy families in Sepphoris for work, and they would have struggled to make ends meet while paying heavy taxes, watching whatever money they and their neighbors earned flow out of villages

2. This interpretation of Luke 1–2 draws upon my book *Surprised by God: Praise Responses in the Narrative of Luke-Acts* (New York: Walter De Gruyter), as well as Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1–2* (JSNTSup 88; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993); Stephen Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance* (JSNTSup 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 108–126; and Paul Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," in *Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays Presented in Honor of Paul Schubert*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 111–130.

3. These seven other responses of joy and praise in Luke 1–2 are offered by the following characters: John *in utero* (1.41, 44), Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives (1.58), Zechariah (1.64, 68–79), a heavenly host (2.13–14), a group of shepherds (2.20), Simeon (2.29–32) and Anna (2.38).

4. Because Luke and Acts share the same author and can be understood to tell one continuous story, some scholars consider them to be two volumes of a single work, which they refer to as Luke-Acts.

5. When Abraham learns from God that he will have a child despite his old age, and he will inherit the land, he responds, "How am I to know?" (Gen 15.8).



and into urban centers—like Sepphoris or Zechariah's Jerusalem—to line the pockets of the upper class. As Mary came of age, she must have known of peasant unrest brewing around her, directed against the oppressive regime of Roman and Herodian power. (Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., this unrest burst into open rebellion, only to be crushed with great force by the Romans, who according to the Jewish historian Josephus, crucified approximately 2,000 people in the countryside around Mary's home when Jesus was a toddler.)

But Luke merely hints at such details: he focuses instead on Mary's reaction to Gabriel. If the angel's appearance to a priest in the temple offers something of a surprise, then his arrival to a peasant girl in an unimportant Galilean village represents a real shock (Luke 1.26–27). Mary is understandably confused, not only by the angel's visit but also by his strange greeting. He says to her: "Joyous greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1.28).<sup>6</sup> Luke tells us that despite Mary's surprise and confusion, she thinks deeply about the angel's words (Luke 1.29). Such presence of mind is impressive, given Mary's age and the fact that an angel stands before her. When Mary learns from the angel that she will conceive and bear a son who will reign in the line of David, she (like Zechariah) questions how this might be (Luke 1.30–34).

But in contrast with Zechariah, Mary's question is *not* a failure. Why? Because Gabriel's second announcement is entirely unprecedented in scripture. Mary has no old story to help her understand and accept the angel's words, and so the angel does not criticize her question but answers it. Moreover, he offers a sign: Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy will confirm Mary's own (Luke 1.35–37). At this point, Mary's deep thinking produces faith: "See! I am the Lord's servant," she says. "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1.38). Here, Luke's artful contrast between aged priest and peasant girl reaches its peak. Zechariah has requested a child, but when God answers this request, the elderly priest doubts, even though he knows the story of Sarah's miraculous fertility. But Mary, who presumably has not requested a child, believes the angel about both Elizabeth's pregnancy and her own, even though her pregnancy represents an utter surprise in the history of God's people.

Mary trusts the angel, but she nevertheless takes him up on his offer of a sign, rushing to Elizabeth (Luke 1.39). She finds not only a pregnant relative but prophetic confirmation of her faith. When the two women meet, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, which Elizabeth interprets as a direct response to Mary's greeting (Luke 1.40–41, 44). Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth then affirms both Mary's pregnancy and her faith (Luke 1.42–43, 45). The joyous leaping of John *in utero* begins to fulfill the angel's anticipation of joy, but this fulfillment breaks forth most fully in Mary's song of praise.

### MARY'S SONG OF PRAISE

In response to everything that has happened in the story, Mary sings a song, traditionally called the *Magnificat* (Luke 1.46–55). She offers joyous praise with the following lyric:

My soul magnifies the Lord,	46
And my spirit begins to rejoice in God my Savior,	47
Because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant.	48a
See! From now on all generations will call me blessed,	48b
Because the Mighty One (holy is his name!) has done great things for me.	49
His mercy flows from generation to generation upon those who fear him.	50
With his powerful arm, he has done mighty things:	51a
Scattered the arrogant, who harbor pride in their inmost thoughts;	51b
Brought down rulers from their thrones but lifted up those of humble station;	52
Filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty;	53
And helped his servant Israel, remembering mercy,	54
Just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*	55

(\* Luke 1.46–55: Translation is mine, adapted from the NET version.)

6. The Greek word *chaire*, translated here "joyous greetings," is an imperative form of the verb "to rejoice" and serves as a common greeting in extra-biblical Greek texts. I have argued elsewhere that it ought to be translated so as to capture its sense not only of greeting but also of joy, which alerts the English reader that Gabriel's message of joy appears in his announcement to Mary, as well as to Zechariah.



Because the song brings the action of the story temporarily to a halt, it draws the reader's attention to Mary's words, which pull together "threads from the surrounding narrative," punctuating and interpreting the story Luke tells.<sup>7</sup>

Mary sings her song, the *Magnificat*, in the tradition of her people, drawing heavily upon the inheritance of faith. Her very first word—"to magnify" (*megalunō*)—appears frequently as a praise verb in the Psalms, always in association with joy, as it is here in her song (Luke 1.46–47).<sup>8</sup> The remainder of the *Magnificat* continues in the same manner, alluding to Genesis, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah and especially the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2.1–10). Like a well-crafted quilt, Mary's song artfully combines bits and pieces of older fabric into something beautiful, which is at once old and new.

This quilt-like song features vibrant colors: it is an energetic expression of heart-felt praise that grows out of Mary's immediate experience of divine mercy. She describes this experience as God looking "upon the humiliation of his servant" (Luke 1.48a). Her choice of the word "servant" serves a dual purpose. Certainly, Mary means herself, because she has already referred to herself as God's servant (Luke 1.38). But this word also signifies the people of Israel, whom Mary describes as God's servant later in her song (Luke 1.54).<sup>9</sup> This double entendre helps explain why Mary can claim that God has looked upon her "humiliation," a word that has puzzled interpreters.<sup>10</sup> Why would Mary—who seems to be a faithful young woman—describe herself as humiliated? But if we recognize Mary as both an individual and as a representative of her people, who have been long oppressed by various empires, then the word "humiliation" becomes more understandable: it suggests the affliction and suffering of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

The angel has claimed to Mary that her child will "reign over the house of David." Mary's words about the reversal of humiliation now interpret the angel's words as announcing the dawn of her people's restoration. She recognizes that her own miraculous fertility initiates the salvation long anticipated by the Jews (Luke 1.50, 54–55). Her song proclaims that in doing something great for her (Luke 1.49), God has also done something great for her people, breaking decisively into history with divine mercy (Luke 1.51a). In other words, through wise reflection on scripture, Mary recognizes fully what Zechariah did not: her experience signals the redemption of her community.<sup>12</sup>

Mary's song envisions this communal redemption as a great reversal that turns the world upside down. Using the metaphor of God's "powerful arm," she looks back to moments when God saved Israel from oppressive empires, particularly the exodus, an event in which arrogant Egyptians were brought down while enslaved Hebrews were brought up (Luke 1.51).<sup>13</sup> Mary recalls this past salvation in order to proclaim that

7. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 98.

8. The word *megalunō*, used by Mary, depicts praise of God in the Psalms in the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, as in Psalms 20.5–7; 34.3; 35.27; 40.16; 69.30–32; 70.4; 92.4–5; 104.1; 126.2–3 (cited by English chapter and verse).

9. The vocabulary for "servant" (or slave) varies: *doulē* (Luke 1.38, 48) and *pais* (Luke 1.54). These two Greek words function in an essentially synonymous way, although *doulē* is feminine, with reference to Mary, while *pais* is masculine.

10. Although many versions of the NT soften the word translated as "humiliation" above (*tapeinōsis*), rendering it "humble state" (NIV) or "lowliness" (NRS), it typically has harsher connotations: suffering, affliction, or humiliation. It is possible that Mary's social status was literally that of a servant/slave, which might explain her use of the word *tapeinōsis*.

11. In the Septuagint, the word *tapeinōsis* refers most often to the affliction and suffering of God's people, due either to oppression by empires (Gen 41.52; Deut 26.7; 1 Sam 9.16; 2 Sam 16.12; 2 Kings 14.26; Neh 9.9) or to sin (Ezra 9.7). In other cases, it describes an ancient woman's humiliation with regard to her husband, reversed by pregnancy and the birth of a child (Hagar in Gen 16.11; Leah in Gen 29.32; Hannah in 1 Sam 1.11). These two ways of using the word *tapeinōsis* merge in metaphorical depictions of Jerusalem as a woman whose sin has left her estranged from her husband (God) and bereft of children (Isa 40.2; Lam 1.3–9). In Lamentations 1.9, for example, afflicted Jerusalem cries out to God, "Look on my humiliation!" In her song, Mary now claims that God has finally done so: God has looked on the humiliation of his (female) servant, and Mary's pregnancy signifies the beginning of God's reversal of her people's humiliation.

12. Zechariah will ultimately make this connection himself, when his tongue is loosed by God, resulting in his own song of praise, traditionally titled the *Benedictus* (Luke 1.67–79).

13. The strong arm of God describes the divine rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod 6.1, 6; 15.16; 32.11). Later prophetic texts, looking back at the exodus, use the image of deliverance by God's strong arm to offer hope for Israel's restoration following the Babylonian exile (Isa 51.5, 9–11; 52.10; and 59.16).



now—in the redemption initiated by her pregnancy—God's powerful arm has begun a similar process of social upheaval: in her words, scattering the proud of heart while helping his servant Israel (Luke 1.51b, 54), bringing down rulers while lifting up the oppressed (Luke 1.52), and dismissing the satiated rich, leaving them empty, while filling the hungry (Luke 1.53).

This language has the ring of insurrection or revolt. It calls to mind the very sort of peasant uprising that would erupt around Mary's home only a few years later. Yet modern readings of the *Magnificat* sometimes soften this imagery, spiritualizing Mary's words or projecting their "message of redemption-by-social-transformation" into a distant future.<sup>14</sup> As the poet Thomas John Carlisle writes:

*we choose to ignore  
the thunder and the tenor  
of her song,  
its revolutionary beat.*"<sup>15</sup>

### A REVOLUTIONARY BEAT

What then should we make of the "revolutionary beat" of Mary's words? On one level, a spiritualizing of Mary's song is understandable, for her son Jesus does not—in a literal, immediate, political way—pull down the oppressive regime of his day, nor does he aim to do so. Mary the peasant will live the remainder of her life under the thumb of empire, while her son will submit to death at its hand.<sup>16</sup> But on another level, we should not too quickly dismiss the real-world implication of her words, for if we continue reading, we find that Mary's vision of social transformation echoes through the rest of the story Luke tells.

As Jesus begins his ministry, we hear again the revolutionary beat of Mary's song. Quoting Isaiah about the "year of the Lord's favor," Jesus announces that he will preach good news to the poor, proclaim release for captives and sight for the blind, and send forth the oppressed in release (Luke 4.18–19). As the story progresses, Jesus releases people oppressed by disease, disability, poverty and sin (Luke 9.45; 13.10–17; 18.35–43). He opens the kingdom to the "poor," a word that points not simply to those who are economically oppressed but embraces all "people ordinarily defined . . . by their dishonorable status, their exclusion."<sup>17</sup> He calls people on opposite sides of the political spectrum, both zealots opposed to Roman rule and tax collectors working for Rome. He dines with everyone—Pharisees, lepers, rich, poor, men, women, "righteous" and sinners—urging his followers to do the same (Luke 5.29–32; 7.34–39; 13.29–30; 14.1, 7–24; 15.1–2). To meet at the same table, the powerful must come down while the disenfranchised must be lifted up: in a sense, table fellowship realizes the reversal about which Mary sings. The revolution of Jesus plays out not in political upheaval but in divinely-initiated, grace-empowered, all-encompassing love that produces real social change (Luke 6.27–36; 7.37–47; 10.25–37).

This great reversal does not end with Jesus but continues, in response to his resurrection, through the activities of his followers, as narrated in Acts. The new community centered on Jesus shares its possessions, an economic "lifting up and bringing down" that results in everyone's needs being met (Acts 2.44–45). As this community expands, it opens to include people formerly excluded, such as Samaritans (Acts 8.5–8), eunuchs (Acts 8.27–39) and Gentiles (Acts 10.34–45). Along the way, oppressed people are released, with socio-political repercussions in the real world. For example, Acts 16 tells the story of how God (through Paul) frees a slave girl from oppression by a demon and from economic exploitation by her owners. In telling this story, Luke emphasizes the real-world implications of reversal: the girl's release means the loss of income for her

14. Joel Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

15. This poem, quoted here from Green, may be found in Thomas John Carlisle, *Beginning with Mary: Women of the Gospels in Portrait* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 4.

16. The Gospel of Luke in particular pins the responsibility for Jesus' death on a Roman-Herodian alliance of power (Luke 23.11–12).

17. Green, *Theology*, 82. In Luke, the "poor" appear in lists (often in the first position) of the bound, oppressed, hungry, mournful, persecuted, blind, lame, deaf, lepers, maimed and ulcerated (Luke 4.18; 6.20; 7.22; 14.13, 21; 16.20, 22).



owners, and it “agitates the city” (Acts 16.19–20). To state this point another way, when Jesus’ followers live in accordance with the beat of Mary’s song, they turn the world upside down (Acts 17.6).<sup>18</sup>

Thus Luke’s story, on the one hand, guides us away from hearing Mary’s song as an anthem of political insurrection, but on the other hand, it also warns us against interpreting her words as wholly “spiritual,” if by spiritual we mean other-worldly, with no effect in the here and now. Instead, the revolutionary beat of Mary’s song plays out in acts of love that herald change in the real world in which Jesus and his followers lived. Should not the beat of her song also reverberate through the contemporary church, ringing out reversal in our real world today?

### PRAISE AND THE WORLD AS GOD INTENDS IT TO BE

Mary sings of the world as God intends it to be, of God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, of tearing down walls that divide, and of a table shared by all without hoarding or maneuvering for status. In response to the advent of redemption, she praises God as if this divine vision has already been realized. Thus her song is not only revolutionary but intensely (and on the face of it, irrationally) hopeful. Despite the apparent triumph of darkness, despair, oppression and death, she sings out that God is breaking into her world through the unlikely agency of an unborn peasant child, who is the Son of God. She can sing this song—which enlivens all of Luke-Acts—because she trusts the strong arm of her loving God.

Mary’s world desperately needed such a song, and our world needs it too. The allure of the status quo so easily seduces us into believing that the world cannot change, at least in any profound way. We lose the vision of God’s kingdom. But Christian praise (along with its older sibling, Jewish praise, to which it owes a great debt) cries out against such inertia. It views the world as alive with the possibility of divinely-empowered transformation. It watches for evidence of God’s mercy pouring into a dark world, and it shouts out when the kingdom breaks in, singing boldly that God has *done* something.<sup>19</sup> Stoic praise offers a useful contrast: it is careful to celebrate only the status quo, to offer thanks for everything *as it is*. In the Stoic understanding of praise, the divine does not break in to right wrongs, bring justice, or turn the tables. The Stoic god never considers a great reversal. Rather, everything is as it should be. Mary sings against such a view: *her* God is changing the world.

In *The Sound of Music*, the pastoral opening song by Maria seems, at first glance, to be completely unconnected with the later dark turn in the plot, when the Nazis invade Austria. But by the end of the film, a viewer realizes that the singing of the von Trapp family symbolizes Austrian resistance to Nazi oppression. The hills indeed are alive with the sound of music, which cannot be suppressed. So too, in the Gospel of Luke, Mary’s song initiates a series of praise responses that reject apathy and shout out resistance to oppression of all sorts by celebrating God’s mercy for the poor. These thousands of years later, Mary issues a clarion call to modern Christians: will you join my song?

**KINDALEE PFREMMER DE LONG** TEACHES NEW TESTAMENT AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA. HER BOOK *SURPRISED BY GOD: PRAISE RESPONSES IN THE NARRATIVE OF LUKE-ACTS* WAS RECENTLY PUBLISHED BY WALTER DE GRUYTER (2009).

18. In Acts 17.6, opponents of Jesus’ disciples accuse them of “turning the world upside down.” This English phrase is a traditional way of translating the verb *anastatoō*. It could also be taken to mean “inciting rebellion” against Rome. In either case, this word emphasizes the real-world impact of the reversal theme.

19. Such praise songs—like the *Magnificat*—can have a proleptic quality. In other words, praise may respond to the earliest moments of a dawn of redemption, to a glimmer of light in the present that heralds a high noon of divine salvation in the future. Proleptic praise may be voiced even in the midst of suffering, as in the concluding praise of psalms of lament (e.g., Psalms 43.5; 69.30–36). On the importance of lament, see the article on Hannah’s song by Mark and Angela Manassee, in this issue of *Leaven*.